

Interview with Ben Shepard

10 / 10 / 2010 | , INTERVIEWS

Ben Shepard

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This conversation took place over video Skype with Lauren Larken, Provocateur from Shape of Change, and Benjamin Shepard, PhD, is Assistant Professor of Human Services at City Tech/City University of New York. He is the author/editor of five books, including the second part of this study, *Play, Creativity, and the New Community Organizing* (also under contract with Routledge) and *Community Projects as Social Activism: From Direct Action to Direct Services* (Sage).

LL: How do you define change over time? How do you see it manifest in your personal life and work?

Ben: Organizing change isn't a soccer game. It doesn't end after two hours with a 2/1 score or a 1/0 score. From a positivist point of view, even in the corporate world, you can look at quarterly reports and see- we are ahead, we are winning, change is happening!

Howard Zinn, who was with SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) will talk about how historians in Albany, GA site Montgomery as a big win with de-segregation of buses.

There was no clear identification of a score or a winning. Except that when the campaign was over the people that lived there felt like the city was never going to be the same again.

Winning takes place in lots of cultural ways in very subtle ways life. On a one on one basis. doesn't have to be just the way I thought it was, it's definitely not a soccer game.

When I moved to New York Giuliani wanted to shut down all the sex clubs as the Triple X zoning law was going into place. It felt freeing to join the fight against prohibitive progressive politics. The basic argument is, "get the Government out of my underpants," [and that] this is a moral panic, this is a sex panic. I remember how freeing it felt in that moment to say, Yah this is completely right, "The People Perverted will not be Converted!" It felt liberating from the East Coast Social Moore kind of stuffiness. I didn't have to worry about what the people in the Country Club or in Princeton would think. I was gonna live my own life. Being able to come out on my own terms and be okay about it and let the chips fall where they are going to fall.

LL: What would constitute true political change in our country?

Ben: It's real personal. When people find space for their own self determination and they can define that on their own terms.

Change starts with real personal real micro tribes building their own spaces and practices. The Radical Faeries have been building their own rituals of freedom and enjoyment and convivial social relations for many years and if you look at the second biggest parade in California is the Folsom Leather Parade where a bunch of people get together all weekend long saying, "we are gonna engage in our own practice of self and it is going to be meaningful and we will set our own terms for democracy and self determination on our own level."

Sarah Schulman said, "You have to have a plan for what you want to have happen, a strategy to get that done that you are willing to do" If you can't get all those three things done you may not have change.

Being flexible about Strategies and Tactics. You can fetishize one tactic over and over and over and not get anything done. Some of this is a stage. What is the audience for the performance. Who do we want to perform for?

What are stages of a campaign? There is something really useful for getting what you want. What is your ask? Where is your research-where is your policy in the food-chain? Who/What/When/and How? Who is affected by this problem? Who is affected by this issue. First is the Ask, Then the Strategy, then the Research, then the communication and media. How are we going to mobilize people around communicating about this ask.

We are thinking about not just a press conference or a policy briefing but also thinking about creative policy. Perhaps some direction action or theatre. But also prefiguring that solution. Creating an embodied solutions. If you want to get out more clean syringes because you know that HIV is being spread through intravenous drug use then pass out those syringes; if you want more green space, build more community gardens. It is not just saying what you are against but building what you are for with in your direct action.

Research around the legal strategies in terms of a short and long term solution. If you want to give out clean syringes you need to figure out whether it is legal or not legal. If it is illegal have cameras with you if you are willing to take the bust, what is the extent of the bust you will be taking. Know your rights.

Also know if it is an enforcement strategy for a campaign, such as National Welfare Rights Organization. Richard Cloward and Frances Fox Piven [Cloward/Piven Strategy] knew there were some welfare laws on the books that weren't being used so they said, lets enforce these laws that are on the books.

In a group I am working with on the Bike Lanes in New York we have spent five years asking the city to enforce it's own traffic laws that cars aren't allowed to park in bike lanes. It doesn't say that this is a parking lot or a taxi stand. Bikes ride in bike lanes. They don't paint cars on the lanes, they paint bikes in the lanes. They are bike lanes, they are for bikes.

Viable feasible strategies on the ground to show what a more sustainable non polluting city looks like and bike lanes are a really simple ways of creating a healthier city in the here and now. Using clowning and positivity we get cars to move out of the bike lane.

Research, Media, Direct Action Mobilizing and Play. For creative change we have to have some level of enjoyment along the road while we are doing the heavy lifting. If there isn't a play element we are going to really miss a big piece. A lot of people leave the culture piece until the very end

The people I know that are in organizing for the long term they play allot. If people don't get their needs met when they go to a demo or a meeting it's like walking away from dinner with out a meal.

If there is not celebrating along the road people will loose interest. In 1977 the Young Lords a group in New York stopped organizing because of all **COINTELPRO** [(an acronym for **C**ounter **I**ntelligence **P**rogram) was a series of covert, and often illegal, projects conducted by the United States Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) aimed at investigating and disrupting dissident political organizations within the United States.] when Richie Perez and Ricky Meléndez hung the Puerto Rican flag from the Statue of Liberty and of course they all got arrested. Tito Puente was Ricki Malendez' uncle and played benefit parties for their legal funds. They had a pretty good time when Puente was playing those shows. Benefits are a way to celebrate life honor their relationships. People who stay in organizing for a long time make this a part of their daily life as much as possible.

LL: What is Utopia?

Ben: It is right here and right now. I am trying to build it today. Utopia seems like Socialist Propaganda. It is not some day to be seized. I am trying to enjoy my day every single day. A creative sense of the solution in the here and now.

I get very scared about the suburbanization of New York City. I also get excited about fabulous things people are doing in their cities all over the world. Last year I went to a community event called Earth Celebration lead by Felicia [Young].....and they had a right of Spring Celebration where people dress as vegetables and flowers and I was walking over with my daughter and I remember seeing a few of my students and friends playing double dutch right by a fountain on the West Side Highway. The little moments that take shape in front of our eyes. Nothing planned nothing big. Those

little moments are what I live for. Last summer I came back from traveling in Sweden and Berlin. There is a park right where the wall used to be and it has become a big public space where the wall used to be. There are these big surrealist sculpture for kids to climb on, there was live music and graffiti art murals where the wall used to be and I thought this is a really an indigenous community space that transformed a once repressive space.

There was an 80's bike dance ride and we were dancing in Tompkins Square Park. Any one who says the streets of New York are dead hasn't spent a summer night in New York City, the city is pulsing with life. There were 5 guys on low rider bikes and we were playing punk music and we were playing, "It's Raining Men" and "Push It" and at the West Side Highway people were gesturing what "Push It" meant to them. Then a police officer came and told us that we couldn't have the sound system but he wasn't trying ruin the party. Then there is the Wilhelm Reich stuff where the people don't want anyone to enjoy themselves because they aren't enjoying themselves.

I've taken to calling John Boehner the Republican, John "Boner" and these guys who are kind of misanthropes and they feel comfortable get rid of Habeas corpus, denying people health care, [the sentiment] "I'd like income distribution to move towards one percent owning 90 percent of the wealth in this country, one of five new yorkers living in poverty, I am really comfortable with that separation."

The people who feel connected. The people who sing and perform and work in community gardens with their neighbors go to gospel choirs with their friends. They feel connected with other people so they want them to have health care, they want them to have embodied gestures with each other and a healthy community.

People that don't have that enjoyment in their lives try to live larger than others.

LL: The people who are oppressed become oppressors.

Ben: Immigration reform will be next, rhetoric, [Emma] Lazarus, "*Give me your poor and your hungry*," would be called a *Pinko Commie*. I wish there was a social change story that a lot of people could participate in. I was really happy seeing health care move towards a re-distributive program, it is a building block, a process.

LL: How do you define Freedom? Where do you feel the most Free?

Ben: I define freedom in the body. When your body can move in directions that it wants to move in. Freedom of thought. Freedom from Shame. There are all sorts of horrible antiquated consequences for People who live shame based lives.

Look at what is happening with the Catholic Church and the cover ups of the abuse of the kids. In a German paper last week it said, when you create a system of celibacy that prohibits people from enjoying their bodies and engaging with people the way we feel that we need to do you are going to have a context of inhibition and repression. Repression finds expression. Maybe not conscious expression. I think there was a priest in Milwaukee that had non-consensual sex with 200 deaf boys so he wouldn't be caught. I think that [Elena] Juerdo was right with the authoritarian personality, I think Wilhelm Reich was right in the Mass Psychology of Fascism. When sex is repressed and we are not allowed to feel connected with other people, on a personal, chemical, physical level, it's easier to annihilate or torture them. Walt Whitman, "I am you, you are me." The Martin Buber, I Thou: If we don't have respectful, sane consent mutual connection the consequences are horrible.

I think War is instigated when we aren't connected with our self we want to define our sense of self by who is crazy, and who is not me versus—when you are connected with other people you don't need to define yourself by what you are not. I am interested in the politics of freedom based in affirmative gestures of care and community, pre-figurative gestures creating a better world, one that we want to live in with public space, green space, bike lanes and community gardens. Affirmative connection with other folks. Freedom to connect or not connect with other people as we wish.

LL: Where do you feel the most free?

Ben: Walking down the street, in my apartment, riding my bike, hiking. To me it's that sense that I can navigate multiple parts of myself in one day, in one city. Walt Whitman said *"Do I contradict myself? Yes I contradict myself. I'm bountiful."*

The freedom to walk into the class room in a suit, work well with my students and then put on a clown outfit and ride on my bike, then come and see my family and enjoy those multiple identifies as a part of my life. To feel free and open being comfortable talking about being part of all those communities in one week or one day. Self determination leads me to feel the most free in multiple ways.

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